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The Psychology and Sociology of Terrorism

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The Psychology and Sociology of Terrorism

(Maria Rasmussen)

WHO JOINS A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION?

Twenty-five years ago, two authors produced the following study:

SAMPLE: 350 known urban terrorists from 18 countries (Middle East, Latin America, Western Europe, Japan)
active in 1966-76

AGE: 22-25

GENDER: over 80% male, women in support roles

MARITAL STATUS: 75-80% single

SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND: 2/3 middle or upper class (except IRA)

EDUCATION: 2/3 some college or graduate work (except IRA)

PLACE OF RECRUITMENT: university

Source: Charles A. Russell and Bowman H. Miller, "Profile of a Terrorist", *Terrorism*, 1:1, 1977, pp.17-34

These findings seem to be generally verified when we look at individual (but very different) terrorist organizations, such as the Basque ETA or the Italian Red Brigades.

The Italian Red Brigades

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>		<u>People they knew inside</u>	
female 25%	born up to 1945	8.4%	1	26.1%
	1946-50	16.2%	2	14.6%
	1951-55	36.4%	3	4.7%
	1956-60	34.5%	4	7.6%
	1961-63	4.4%	5-7	5.5%
			8+	41.6%

<u>Occupation and social class</u>		<u>Prior political involvement</u>	
working class	42.9%	Communist Party	2.1%
petty bourgeois	34.2%	unions	4.9%
liberal professions	5.1%	new left	28.5%
unemployed	17.8%	autonomous collectives	63.6%
		other	0.8%

Source: Donatella della Porta, *Il Terrorismo di Sinistra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990), ch.4

The Basque ETA
(Euskadi Ta Askatasuna)

Gender	Age when joining, or first arrested
male 93.1%	24.8 mean, range 16-45
Occupation and/or class	
working class	30.9%
lower middle class	12.3%
middle class	29.6%
upper class	2.5%
students and priests	18.5%
unemployed	6.2%

Source: Robert P. Clark, "Patterns in the Lives of ETA Members", in Peter H. Merkl (ed.), *Political Violence and Terror* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Joseba Zulaika, *Basque Violence* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1988), *passim*

However, the interesting issue is whether these data change over time, and what the consequences of these changes are for law enforcement. A comparison of ETA members in the 1970s and 1990s shows that by the last decade:

- Female participation increases to 11.2%
- 56% of members join when they are 20 or younger
- working class participation decreases by 20%
- membership is now disproportionately drawn from major urban centres
- 40% of members are fully ethnic Basques, and over 30% are non-Basques

Source: Fernando Reinares, *Patriotas de la Muerte* (Madrid: Taurus, 2001)

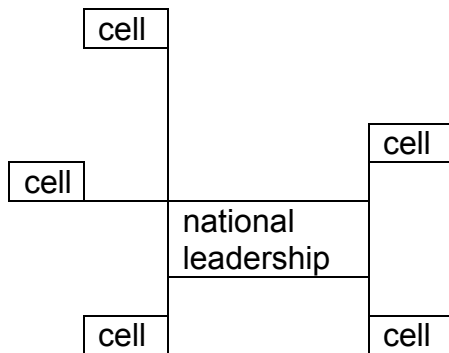
WHAT FACTORS WOULD EXPLAIN THE BEHAVIOUR OF A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION?

Scholars and practitioners posit 3 different explanations:

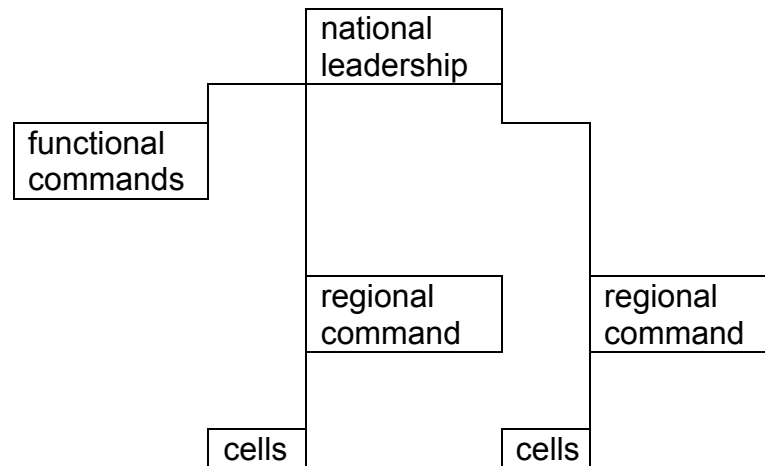
1. The psychological approach argues that individuals join terrorist organizations in order to commit acts of terrorism. What drives them is a penchant for violence which, if not satisfied within the terrorist organization would be fulfilled elsewhere. Variants of this approach explain Al Qaeda acts as demonstrations of fanaticism.
2. The strategic approach argues that a terrorist organization has a series of political objectives, which it chooses to accomplish through violence. Individuals join the group because they agree with its overall objectives. The groups' actions and intended actions must be analyzed in terms of whether they further the group's goals.
3. The organizational approach argues that over time, what will drive action will not be the terrorist group's ultimate objectives, but the internal dynamics (the "politics") within the group. It doesn't matter if, over time, it becomes clear that the ultimate goals are unattainable. Organizational survival becomes another ultimate goal. For law enforcement, there are 2 important corollaries here, involving a) the importance of terrorist organizational structures; and b) the importance of group dynamics.

TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Wheel



Pyramid



Source: Martha Crenshaw, "An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism", *Orbis*, 29:3, 1985, pp.465-489; María José Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol. Armed Struggle 1969-1979* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), ch.8

Some valid generalizations on personality and group behaviour within terrorist groups

1. There is no “terrorist personality”. Individuals join a terrorist group after they have tried other political involvement or because of “preconditions” or “precipitants”
2. Terrorism is a social activity. Individuals join in groups and the emotional links become stronger in the underground
3. The distribution of beliefs among members is uneven. There are major differences between individual and group ideology. Ideology is not necessarily the main component of motivation – terrorists are practitioners and not theoreticians
4. The socialization in the underground is intense. The individual’s identity becomes tied to the survival of the group. Over time, organizational survival and emotional relationships become as important (if not more) than the groups’ stated goals
5. Counterterrorist measures must attempt to change individual beliefs and to weaken group cohesion

Source: Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism”, *Comparative Politics*, 13, 1981, pp.379-99; and “The Psychology of Political Terrorism”, in Margaret G. Hermann (ed.), *Political Psychology* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986); Donatella della Porta (ed.), *Social Movements and Violence* (CT: Jai Press, 1992), esp. pp.3-28 and 259-90; Gurutz Jáuregui Bereciartu, *Ideología y Estrategia de ETA* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1981); María José Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol. Armed Struggle 1969-1979* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), ch.7,9; Padraig O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), *passim*; Klaus Wasmund, “The Political Socialization of West German Terrorists”, in Peter H. Merkl (ed.), *Political Violence and Terror* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986)